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Anti-lockdown protesters irk premier by turning Canadian flag upside down

Protesters call on Doug Ford to lift restrictions in place to slow spread of COVID-19

Muriel Draaisma · CBC News · Posted: May 02, 2020 6:20 PM ET | Last Updated: May 3, 2020

Protesters gathered on the Ontario legislative grounds to demand that the provincial government lift restrictions in place to slow the spread of COVID-19. At its peak, there were an estimated 300 people. A few held an upside down Canadian flag. (Mehrdad Nazarahari/CBC)

Anti-lockdown protesters drew the ire of Ontario Premier Doug Ford on Saturday when they turned a Canadian flag upside down during their demonstration.

Protesters gathered on the Ontario legislative grounds to demand that the provincial government lift restrictions in place to slow the spread of COVID-19. At its peak, there were an estimated 300 people.

"Open the economy now Doug," read one sign at the protest. "All health is essential," read another.

When asked about the protest at a news briefing at Queen's Park, Ford blasted the protesters for not displaying the flag right side up. The protest was the second weekend one organized by people opposed to COVID-19 restrictions in Ontario.

The premier said when he looked outside and saw the flag being flown upside down, he got angry because it is disrespectful.

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"What just burns me up, more than anything, more than them standing out there, is I look out the window and I see our Canadian flag being flown upside down," he said.

Upside down flag disrespects military, Ford says

"And when I see our flag, our Canadian flag flown upside down, that's the utmost disrespect to the men and women that are overseas fighting for our freedoms, our Canadian military, the six families that lost loved ones in the crash last week, the 250 men and women that are in harm's way walking into the long-term care homes and saving people's lives," Ford continued.

An anti-lockdown protester holds a sign at a demonstration on the Ontario legislative grounds. (Natalie Kalata/CBC)

"And they have the nerve to fly our Canadian flag upside down and disrespect the men and women of our Canadian Armed Forces and the people of Canada that have all been united through this challenge? That's what really, really burns me up.

"If they want to fly our flag upside down, they don't respect our country, I'll be the first to help them pack their bags and they can find a country that they want."

Ford acknowledged that the restrictions imposed on the province through emergency orders are challenging but added that gathering in a group and refusing to keep two metres apart endangers the protesters themselves.

"I understand. People are hurting out there and people want to get back to work. And there's a lot of people hurting and I can appreciate it," Ford said.

"But what they are doing is putting their lives in jeopardy, as far as I am concerned, with congregating, side by side. So, I get it. I'm not against any protest. We live in a free society."

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Last weekend, Ford called the anti-lockdown demonstrators "a bunch of yahoos."

Ontario has forbidden gatherings of more than five people during the pandemic and the city of Toronto has a physical distancing bylaw in place.

Police say they ticketed nobody at protest

Const. David Hopkinson, spokesperson for the Toronto police, said no one was ticketed at the protest on Saturday afternoon.

In a news release on Friday, police reminded the public to follow the advice of public health officials to stay at home as much as possible and travel outside of the home for "brief trips for essential reasons." Police said members of the public should remember to practise physical distancing at all times.

Enforcement will be used as necessary to ensure the public complies with provincial directives, police added.

"All organized public events and social gatherings of over five people are prohibited," police said in the release.

According to the federal government's website, the Canadian flag should never be flown upside down "except as a signal of distress in instances of extreme danger to life."

With files from Desmond Brown, Natalie Kalata

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